

April 10, 2001

TO: Participants in the State Assessment Program Workshops

FROM: Mary Ann Snider, Interim Director  
Office of Assessment

RE: Questions and Answers

Once again, thank you for attending one of the workshops in a recent series that outlined the current assessment program. This year, in particular, we have taken important steps toward fully including all children in the assessments and reporting their results. Naturally, many questions were asked concerning the mechanics of including “all kids” and about the rationale for wanting to include them. Attached are a summary of the questions raised across all five workshops along with their answers and the handbook “Requirements for Student Participation and Assessment Accommodations”.

All of us in the Office of Assessment are available to provide you with additional information or clarification if needed. Please don’t hesitate to call us for help. Your sincere efforts to understand and implement the program are deeply appreciated.

cc: Superintendents  
Field Service Staff

Enclosures

April 10, 2001

Dear Educator:

Rhode Island's State Assessment Program has responded to federal requirements and its own commitment to include "All Kids" by creating new guidelines for state testing this year. This document is intended to capture your concerns and questions. However, we can't respond to each of your questions without first reminding everyone of Rhode Island's commitment to the "All Kids" agenda. Because our core belief is that all students are entitled to strive toward high standards, the assessment system must account for every student. In fact, research suggests that children's performance improves when expectations are high, content is challenging, and instruction is expert. We want nothing less for Rhode Island's children.

The State Assessment Program is designed to answer the question, "When given a set of shared content standards, how do all students perform on a common assessment? We are not assuming that all children enter school with the same benefits, either from birth or environment, but we do think that in time all children might be supported by their families, schools, and communities so that they can reach high standards. That is why all children are tested under the same conditions. The state's snapshot of student achievement must account for everyone.

This approach to school accountability depends on the sharing of information – test results along with school and student characteristics, resources, program information, etc. Collectively, the information should help everyone understand, not explain away, the performance. Conversations about this data can be difficult. Reporters want headlines. School committees want results. Parents want their child to be successful. Complicating this is the fact that assessment results vary because only a segment of the standards can be tested each year and that every year there are changes made in the program to try to strengthen the assessments. This year, in particular, we are responding to federal mandates that require us to test more English language learners, account for all students in our reporting, and fully implement the Alternate Assessment.

It is not surprising that many questions and concerns were raised during the recent workshops. We're pleased that we have the opportunity to respond. The answers have been reviewed by staff from the Offices of Special Needs and of Assessment. We hope that you will call us if you have additional questions. Thank you.

Sincerely,

Peter McWalters  
Commissioner

Mary Ann Snider  
Interim Director, Office of Assessment

## FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

### **General Questions**

Question 1: How should student results be used?

- A. Individual student results are helpful when partnered with other data (e.g. student work, grades, observations, etc...). Placement or retention decisions should never be made based on any single assessment.

Question 2: We have children entering and leaving our schools on a regular basis. Why should we be responsible for their results?

- A. There are any number of reasons why children are mobile (parents' job transfer, new home, foster care placement etc...). Virtually no district is without some mobility, although we know some schools have particularly high rates. Our practice is to attribute children's results with the school they're in during testing and to also provide student mobility rates in Information Works! and on our web sites.

Question 3: Must home schooled students participate in state testing?

- A. No, the decision to include home schooled children in state testing is a local policy.

Question 4: Can schools or districts use the research box? If so, how?

- A. On all of the Student Demographic Sheets of all of the tests, there is a Research Box. These fields provide options to collect data and can be coded for many different school/district purposes. Call the Assessment Office for instructions on use. There will not be any coding in the Research Box this year required by the RI Department of Education.

### **Timing Question**

Question 1: Why did the testing window move to right after April vacation?

- A. The testing schedule was established last summer. A panel of local educators were invited to discuss their concerns about the prior year's assessment and to advise us on how to improve the program. While there is no perfect time for testing, this window was chosen because –
- It is a closer match to the end of grade performance without getting dangerously close to the end-of-year shutdown.
  - Those who scheduled assessments within the district, especially at the high schools, said it was easier to get all the testing done within one timeframe rather than having separate schedule.

## **Writing Assessment Questions**

Question 1: Why is the Grade 11 Writing Assessment done in one period? Doesn't this fly in the face of process writing.

- A. Process writing represents a series of thinking strategies a writer employs. A two period writing assessment doesn't ensure that students will engage in process steps; nor does one extended period prohibit a student from using these strategies. Additionally, a one-session design is consistent with national trends and strengthens test security.

Question 2: Why can't students use a dictionary or thesaurus during the writing assessments?

- A. The test design on the New Standards Reference Exam does not allow for the use of resource materials. The RI Writing Assessment Committee chose this option because spelling is part of the rubric. Correct spelling is considered within the context of how students use language within their piece. For instance, there are some words that should be mastered at particular grade levels. However, teachers and students should be aware that the piece is evaluated holistically and that spelling is a small factor in the overall evaluation.

Question 3: Will the third grade writing assessment still use a six point rubric?

- A. Yes, the writing assessments at grades three and seven will use the same holistic rubric. A new six point rubric has been developed for grade eleven to holistically score persuasive writing.

Question 4: What genres of writing are assessed on the State Writing Assessment?

- A. Grade 3 – Narrative  
Grade 7 – Informative/Expository  
Grade 11 – Persuasive

Question 5: Some districts use the writing assessment scores to place students in classes. Won't a one-day test at grade eleven make the test less reliable?

- A. A score from one assessment should never be used to make placement decisions. The writing assessment is a one-item test. One item is not nearly enough coverage of a student's writing ability for such an important decision.

## **Alternate Assessment Question**

Question 1: Is there an age cutoff for participation in the Alternate Assessment?

- A. There is not an automatic age cutoff for participation. A student's I.E.P. should have a grade level designation. So, for instance, a 19 year old may have a grade level designation of grade eleven. As such, he/she would participate in the Alternate Assessment.

### **I.E.P Questions**

Question 1: Does the I.E.P. designate the grade level for homeroom or instruction?

- A. Decisions for state assessment plan should be based on the child's overall grade level designation. This designation should closely parallel the student's chronological age. Instructional levels should not be used to determine eligibility in state testing.

Question 2: How much flexibility is there in deciding a student's grade level designation?

- A. A student's grade level designation should not be more than two years above or below his/her chronological age.

Question 3: Can a child be in a fourth grade homeroom placement for social reasons and have an I.E.P. designation of second grade for academic performance? And, if possible, would this mean that the child does not have to participate in state testing?

- A. This question, along with many other variations of it, was asked during the sessions. This type of question is really asking about off-grade level testing allowances. Rhode Island's policy is to not allow this practice for state testing. Again, our charge is to provide information about how all children are performing on a common measure. The context and disaggregation data follow, but testing all students at a grade level is necessary to answer the question about how "All Kids" are achieving.

Question 4: Can a parent exempt a child from state assessments in a child's I.E.P?

- A. In Rhode Island an I.E.P. team cannot exempt a child from state testing. Of course, if a parent is insistent or simply keeps a child home, the child won't be tested. This is not an allowable exemption, however; and the child will be counted in the "no score" box when scores are reported.

### **Accommodation Questions**

Question 1: What if a child refuses an accommodation?

- A. Certainly, no student wants to be singled-out or embarrassed. That is why we strongly encourage teachers to use accommodations that have been used with a student prior to state testing. Conversations with students before testing begins might be helpful to discuss with the student what accommodations will be used and how they will help during testing.

Question 2: What happens if the I.E.P. allows for an accommodation that is not allowed on the assessment? (e.g. reading the passage on the New Standards ELA Exam)

- A. While we cannot overrule an IEP, there are provisions to invalidate scores when an accommodation compromises what the test is attempting to measure.
- A child's I.E.P. team should consider identifying accommodations for instruction and for assessment. We are all trying to better understand how accommodations can support children without lowering expectations. RI has just been awarded a grant to study this issue. We will share information as we learn more about accommodations and their influence on instruction, assessment, and IEP construction.

Question 3: What about students with different disabilities? Does the disability determine what accommodation a child is offered; for instance, do students who are dyslexic have to have a scribe?

- A. Decisions about appropriate accommodations should be made based on the needs of the individual child. There are no automatic rules regarding accommodations and types of disabilities.

Question 4: Can children receive accommodations on state assessments that are not listed on their IEPs?

- A. Yes, but only after approval is given by the child's I.E.P. team. This process is true for accommodations given during regular instruction as well as during assessments.

Question 5: How do scribing rules apply?

- A. There are many variations of scribing and the use of technology! Some are easier than others to respond to – for instance, a child may not typically use a scribe for health class, but may need one for the health assessment. Actual scribing requires diligence in order to capture exactly what the child would have written independently. Words must be spelled and punctuation decisions must be made by the child. In other cases, a child might dictate a story in order to maintain fluency and then go back and write it himself or have someone transcribe it based on the previous guidelines. There is also a tremendous amount of new technology that we need to learn more about; more specifically, we need to understand to what extent it supports reading and writing. For example, the Cowrite Program may not be used for the Writing Assessment or the New Standards ELA Exam.

Question 6: Are accommodations for grade 3 pilot testing the same as for grade 3 writing?

- A. Accommodations for grade 3 pilot testing are the same as for the regular tests except for special materials, Braille, Large Print and Spanish Translations.

Question 7: Should testing administrator be the classroom teacher?

- A. To the extent possible, use classroom teacher as test administrator.

Question 8: Any cap to extended time as a testing accommodation?

- A. No. In planning for extended time, think about how much extra time, the child unusually needs to complete classroom assessments and plan accordingly. There is no time limit as long as the child is working productively. Accommodations for any student (who uses accommodations in instruction)
- more than ten minutes extra time = an accommodation
  - IEP: accommodations should be listed and followed.

Question 9: What are appropriate practices for scribing?

- A. Please refer to 2001 assessment accommodations chart, p. 15 & 16 of the 2001 “Requirements for Student Participation and Assessment Accommodations” booklet.

### **Health Assessment Questions**

Question 1: Who administers the health assessment?

- A. The teacher who teaches health education is the best person to administer it. In some schools where this is not possible, teachers of health circulate through classrooms where the assessment is underway.

Question 2: Why can’t students use a dictionary or thesaurus for health assessment?

- A. Dictionaries or thesaurus cannot be used because some of the questions on the health assessment ask for definitions.

Question 3: Can students use spell checkers on the health assessment?

- A. Yes, spell checkers can be used on the health assessment because the health assessment measures a student’s health knowledge and skills and not spelling. (This represents a change from information included in the *Requirements for Students Participation and Assessment Accommodations* handbook.)

### **Test Administration Questions**

Question 1: Last year there was confusion about how to count and return damaged booklets. What does the test administrator do if the bar code is ripped off the booklet?

- A. For any kind of damage, including when the bar code had been ripped off, the Principal/School Testing Coordinator will provide an explanation in writing to the District Testing Coordinator and also will include that information in an envelope with the test booklet under the appropriate header sheet to Harcourt or Measured Progress. (Refer also to Appendix C: Security Steps... in the “School and District Testing Coordinator’s Handbook,” for further information.)

Question 2: Can testing be done in homeroom?

- A. RIDE does not mandate the nature of the testing environment. We consider good testing conditions to include content teachers who administer tests to their usual class groupings.

Question 3: How can class or group summary reports be requested to meet our planning needs?

- A. The “header sheet” above a group of returned answer documents is the cue for the production of a class or group summary report. After logging back all test booklets to be certain that all materials are accounted for, you may as a final step rearrange the booklets (e.g. by course taken, by special program, etc.). In each case, the header sheet should identify the name of the group or teacher and record the number of test booklets accompanying the header sheet.

Question 4: Can gridding be done before testing begins to simplify procedures?

- A. In many cases, demographic coding (name, date of birth, gender, race, education of parents) is best done on a day prior to testing. Program codes (free lunch, IEP status, etc.) are best done at the conclusion of testing, but the sequence is within the discretion of the principal. Each Test Administration Manual provides details about gridding.

Question 5: Regarding test materials, what if our enrollment has increased?

- A. October 1 enrollments submitted to RIDE were the basis for materials delivery (plus a small overage factor). If your enrollment has increased by more than 5 percent, you may need to call for additional New Standards materials (Jessika Mathews 800-228-0752, x5617) or health education or writing assessment materials from Measured Progress (888-559-5722, x6148). Additional test administration manuals can also be requested.

Question 6: Will late changes in our enrollment create inaccuracies in the number of students assigned a “no score”?

- A. Students listed on your April 1 enrollment roster (provided by each district office) will be assigned a “no score” if they do not otherwise receive a valid score in the normal scoring process. If your enrollment increases or decreases from April 1 to the start of testing on April 24, you should inform your superintendent who recently received a form for the correction of enrollments (dated April 2, 2001).

Question 7: What does the test administrator do if the bar code is ripped off the booklet?

- A. You may write in the missing sequence number and attach a letter of explanation.

Question 8: What is to be done with test booklets damaged during testing?

- A. If any test booklets have been damaged, the Principal/School Testing Coordinator will provide an explanation in writing to the District Testing Coordinator and also will include that information in an envelope with the test booklet under the appropriate header sheet to Harcourt or Measured Progress. The District Testing Coordinator will also forward a copy of the explanation only to the Rhode Island Department of Education Assessment Office, keeping one copy for school records.



Question 9: Is there a check-off list for return packaging?

- A. For the health education and writing assessments, a check-off list for return packaging occurs in the “District and School Testing Coordinator’s Handbook.” For New Standards mathematics and English language arts testing, a packaging check-off list is included in Box #1 of delivered test materials under the title “School Testing Coordinator’s Checklist and Directions.”

### **Security Questions**

Question 1: While test booklets must maintain the security process (and number sequences) through the signing back in at the end of the test, how can we facilitate the regrouping of the booklets for return to the testing company in a way that will produce score reports that will be useful to the school and district?

- A. Direct the students to indicate the needed information in the TEACHER portion of Box A on the front of the Student Demographic Sheet. The Research box, on the SCHOOL STAFF USE ONLY side of the Student Demographic Sheet can also be utilized for further school use, such as to identify groups of students. This information will then be available if the school or district requests a data disk from RIDE for future analysis.

Question 2: What should happen if a discrepancy in Serial Numbers is noticed when booklets are passed out to test administrators?

- A. The Principal/School Testing Coordinator should immediately write/explain the discrepancy on the packing slip and make two copies of that packing slip, and then call the appropriate testing company to notify them. (For more information refer to Appendix C in the “School and District Testing Coordinator’s Handbook.”)

Question 3: Why can’t anything be copied or kept for 3<sup>rd</sup> grade writing this year? Are all drafts and booklets and prompts to be returned for the third grade writing assessment?

- A. Because of the field testing at Grade 3 this year, in addition to the regular Grade 3 Rhode Island Writing Assessment, **nothing** at 3<sup>rd</sup> grade can be kept or copied. All first drafts and answer booklets for the third grade writing assessment must be returned. No student work can be photocopied. This applies to both the “regular” and “field test” prompts. All drafts and booklets must be returned, **both** for the regular Writing Assessment and for the field test. The field test prompts must be kept secure since they may become “live” prompts in future years; return of all Grade 3 writing materials minimizes the potential for confusion.

Question 4: Who is a primary test administrator?

- A. The school staff person (classroom teacher, resource teacher, reading teacher, principal, vice principal, teacher assistant, etc.) will administer all of a particular test to a group of students. The group could be an entire class or just a few individuals or even a single individual. All of a particular test means the required testing sessions, for example, the two days of health or the three days of *New Standards* ELA.

### **New Standards Assessment Questions**

Question 1: What form of *New Standards* will be used this year?

A. Form E

Question 2: Are there any changes in the format for either Mathematics or for English Language Arts?

A. No. The format is the same this year as in previous years for both content areas. There is some variation in the standards of the New Standards framework being tested.

Question 3: Is the *New Standards* Mathematics exam really open book?

A. Yes. And students must also have access to a calculator and to standard and metric rulers. They may also use their textbooks, notes and classroom materials/manipulatives.

Question 4: What modes of writing and genre of literature are on Form E of the *New Standards* English Language Arts exam?

A. Several different ones are included from among those in the *New Standards* framework.

### **Scoring and Reporting Questions**

Question 1: Will data be disaggregated?

A. At present, disaggregations occur in the document *Information Works* for the prior year. For more current disaggregations, “The Office of Research, High School Reform and Adult Education at RIDE will provide to appropriately authorized district officials electronic files of all assessment data for their districts. These electronic files can be obtained in the form of flat files, SPSS files, or Excel files. Districts can then produce various disaggregations of interest from these source files. Electronic files may be requested in writing from Dr. Van Yidana at [vyidana@ride.ri.net](mailto:vyidana@ride.ri.net).

Question 2: What happens if a student doesn’t complete the test?

A. For each content area test, a student must provide some response for every session of the test to receive a score. If this does not occur or if an enrolled student takes no portion of the test, such students would receive a “no score” designation. Students with “no score” are regarded as not having met the state performance standard.

Question 3: Can performance targets be set and reported reasonably for small schools?

A. Because measurement reliability and cohort (class) variations are problematic for small schools, RIDE is computing three year score averages (98-00) to serve as a base reporting performance changes. This approach helps to offset the measurement problem at small schools.

Question 4: Won't the new policy of treating "no score" students as not meeting the performance standard conflict with the assumptions under which initial school targets were set in 1998?

A. RIDE has most of the needed data to reconstruct what the school targets would have been for 98-00 under the new reporting rules. This reconstruction will allow us to fairly represent all students in the performance analysis for each year.

Question 5: Where will score reports be sent for students who are "tuitioned-out" of a district?

A. An extra copy of the student score report will be sent to the outplacement special school with instruction to forward this report to the "home district." In addition, the score of the student will be applied to both the outplacement school and to the district summary report in the home district.

Question 6: Why are we putting "limited" children through state assessments? These scores pull down the results of the school.

A. The regulatory answer to this question is that federal IDEA legislation requires that we assess all children in state testing. However, we are compelled to include all children for the following additional reasons –

- All students should have access to the general curriculum;
- Students should learn strategies to handle material beyond their current instructional levels as part of regular classroom practice; and
- Children benefit from being held to higher standards.

The idea of children "pulling down" scores should be thought through carefully. Scores should reflect all the students in the building regardless of whether they contribute to raising or lowering scores. Further clarification about whom a school has opened its doors to is provided when scores are disaggregated.